



## Haiti

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country, which shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, has an area of 10,714 square miles, and its estimated population is 7 to 8 million.

While precise statistics are unavailable, an estimated 50 to 55 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, a decrease from the roughly 80 percent who traditionally were Catholic. The number of Protestants is growing steadily; there are 425 registered congregations, and the largest denominations are Baptist and Pentecostal. Other significant groups include Methodists, Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, and Orthodox Christians. There also are many nondenominational Christian congregations. Other non-Christian groups, all small in size, include Jews, Muslims, Rastafarians, and Baha'is.

Voodoo (vodun), a traditional religion derived in part from West African beliefs, is practiced alongside Christianity (most commonly with Catholicism) by a large segment of the population, although no official statistics on the number of adherents are available. The Government officially recognized voodoo as a religion in 2003; however, it continues to be frowned upon by elite, conservative Catholics and by Protestants. The Government provides no legal status for voodoo except for its recognition as a legitimate religious practice.

Some Protestant and Catholic clergy are politically active. One Protestant pastor leads the Christian Movement for a New Haiti (MOCHRENA) political party, and another leads the National Union of Christians for the Renovation of Haiti (UNCRH) political party. Several Catholic priests remain among the leadership of the Fanmi Lavalas (FL) party of former President Jean Bertrand Aristide, who is himself a former Roman Catholic priest. The Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Protestant Federation occasionally issue statements on political matters.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that practices do not disturb law and order, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The 1987 Constitution grants freedom of religion and directs the establishment of laws to regulate the recognition and operation of religious groups. Under the interim Government, religious affairs fall under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cults (Religious Affairs). The Bureau of Religious Affairs within that ministry is responsible for registering churches, clergy, and missionaries. Recognition by the bureau affords religious groups standing in legal disputes, protects churches' tax exempt status, and extends civil recognition to church documents such as marriage and baptismal certificates. Requirements for registration with the Bureau

of Religious Affairs include information on qualifications of the group's leader, a list of members of the religious organization, and a list of social projects of the organization. Most Catholic and Protestant organizations are registered with the ministry. Registered religious groups are required to submit an annual report of their activities to the bureau. Many nondenominational Christian groups and voodoo practitioners have not sought official status; however, there were no reports of any instance in which this requirement hampered the operation of a religious group. According to the Government, many groups--Christian and voodoo--do not seek official recognition simply because they are not well developed or organized.

Goods brought into the country for use by registered churches and missionaries are exempted from customs duties, and registered churches are not taxed. Some church organizations have complained that customs officials sometimes refused to honor a church's tax-exempt status; however, it appeared that these refusals generally were attempts by corrupt officials to extort bribes rather than to limit religious practices.

For many years, Roman Catholicism was the official religion of the country. While this official status ended with the enactment of the 1987 Constitution, neither the Government nor the Holy See has renounced the 1860 concordat, which continues to serve as the basis for relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the State and the operation of Catholic religious orders. In many respects, Roman Catholicism retains its traditional primacy among the country's religions. Official and quasi-official functions are held in Catholic churches and cathedrals, such as "Te Deum" Masses for Independence Day, Flag Day, and Founders Day. However, in the past several years, the Government has recognized the growing role of Protestant churches. For example, Protestant and Episcopal clergy and voodoo practitioners are now invited to participate when the religious sector is asked to play an advisory role in politics.

The following holy days are observed officially as national holidays: Good Friday, Corpus Christi, All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, and Christmas.

Many foreign missionaries are affiliated with U.S.-based denominations or individual churches. Others are associated with independent, nondenominational Christian groups. Missionary groups operate hospitals, orphanages, schools, and clinics throughout the country. According to a 2004 survey, 83 religious groups send temporary missions on a regular basis to participate in relief and humanitarian activities.

Foreign missionaries enter on regular tourist visas and submit paperwork similar to that submitted by domestic religious groups to register with the Bureau of Religious Affairs. While some missionaries were concerned by the slowness of the Government to issue residence permits, there was no indication that the delay was due to obstructionism.

The Constitution stipulates that persons cannot be required to join an organization or receive religious instruction contrary to their convictions. Therefore, in Catholic or Protestant parochial schools, the school authorities may not permit proselytization on behalf of the church with which they are affiliated. Parents have been quick to complain and publicize isolated instances in which this principle has been violated. There were no such instances during the period covered by this report.

Only 15 percent of schools are public. In 9 percent of these schools, Catholic and other clergy play a role in teaching and administration. Church-run schools and hospitals are subject to oversight by the Ministries of Education and of Health, respectively.

The Government does not interfere with the operation of radio and other media affiliated with religious groups. In addition to the many radio stations operated by religious (mostly Protestant, including evangelical) groups, religious programming is a staple of commercial broadcasting.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

#### Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Religion plays a prominent role

in society. Many citizens display a keen interest in religious matters and freely express their religious beliefs. While society generally is tolerant of the variety of religious practices that flourish, Christian attitudes toward voodoo vary. Many Christians accept voodoo as part of the country's culture; however, others regard it as incompatible with Christianity. This difference in views has led to isolated instances of conflict in the recent past; however, no such instances were reported during the period covered by this report. The Bureau of Religious Affairs has managed periodic tension between some Protestant and voodoo groups effectively. The bureau maintains offices in the central, northern, and southern areas of the country. Tensions between Protestant and voodoo groups are local in nature and usually involve land disputes or conflicts over proselytizing. In some cases, the bureau sends representatives to assist local authorities in settling such disputes. The parties in conflict usually accept the ministry's mediating role.

Ecumenical organizations exist. Interfaith cooperation is perhaps most effective in the National Federation of Private Schools.

Particularly in rural areas, accusations of sorcery have been known to lead to mob violence resulting in deaths. Women generally are targeted in these cases, which usually are precipitated by the death of a child from unknown causes. In view of the prevalence of voodoo in rural areas, it appears likely that voodoo practitioners are targeted in some of these cases, although no examples were reported during the period covered by this report.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy representatives routinely met with religious and civil society leaders to seek their cooperation in the political process. The Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Protestant Federation, and the Episcopal Church each have a seat on the Provisional Electoral Council, with which the Embassy worked regularly as it prepared for elections scheduled for the fall of 2005.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51643.htm)